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Merano WineFestival unveils observatory to track the wine industry’s transformation

The research platform, expected to begin operating in 2027, will study climate risk, softer demand and low-alcohol trends.

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Organizers of the 35th Merano WineFestival used a presentation in Rome on Wednesday to frame this year’s event as more than a tasting showcase, saying the November gathering in northern Italy will focus on how the wine business is changing

under pressure from shifting consumer habits, climate risks and international market uncertainty.

The festival is scheduled for Nov. 6 through Nov. 10 at the Kurhaus in Merano, in Italy’s South Tyrol region. According to organizers, 810 companies will take part, with more than 2,600 products available for tasting and more than 100 producers arriving from 21 foreign countries.

The main new initiative announced ahead of the event is the creation of the Merano Wine Observatory, a new research and analysis platform that is expected to begin operating in 2027. Founder Helmuth Köcher, known in the industry as “The WineHunter,” said the observatory is meant to study and anticipate changes in how wine will be produced, sold, consumed and perceived over the next several years.

The announcement points to a wider concern inside the wine sector. Producers across Europe are facing weaker consumption in some traditional markets, rising attention to health and moderation, and growing pressure to adapt to drought, heat and other climate-related threats. Organizers said the observatory is intended to offer a structured way to track those changes and help the industry respond.

Speaking at the presentation in the Nassirya Hall of the Italian Senate, Köcher said the festival wants to look at market trends as well as product quality. He pointed in particular to growing interest in low-alcohol wines, which he said many producers see as one way to bring younger consumers closer to wine.

The festival presentation also drew a strong institutional presence. Senate Vice President Gian Marco Centinaio hosted the event, alongside Italian Trade Agency President Matteo Zoppas and Agriculture Ministry Undersecretary Luigi D’Eramo. Their participation reflected the growing role that public institutions in Italy are trying to play in export promotion and in defending a wine industry that remains one of the country’s leading agri-food sectors.

Centinaio said the event helps connect wines and food products to their places of origin and gives visitors a chance to speak directly with producers. That kind of contact, he said, is important for building more informed and more responsible wine consumption.

Zoppas said the Italian Trade Agency has increased its support for incoming buyers at Merano, arguing that the event has taken on a more international profile. He said the agency is trying to create more opportunities for meetings between buyers and producers, including small and midsize companies, and noted that Italian wine exports are worth just under 8 billion euros a year.

The festival's program reflects that effort to combine promotion, education and business. The event will open Nov. 6 with an inaugural ceremony linked live to Tokyo, where the first edition of Merano WineFestival Japan is scheduled to take place at the same time. That opening day will also include "TasteTerroir - bio&dynamica," a program focused on organic, biodynamic and natural wines, as well as wines made from Piwi grape varieties, a category often associated with disease-resistant vines and lower-input viticulture.

Other themes on the opening day include sustainable viticulture, amphora winemaking, underwater aging, Riesling and a "Cult Oenologist" program dedicated to leading Italian winemakers selected by Köcher. Organizers said the group includes Franco Bernabei, Carlo Ferrini, Luca D'Attoma, Riccardo Cotarella, Alessandro Cellai, Gianni Menotti, Paolo Caciorgna, Paolo Vagaggini and Gabriele Gadenz.

At the Puccini Theater in Merano, the festival will also stage the award ceremony for the WineHunter Award Platinum honors and present five special Honour Awards. A gala dinner at the Kurhaus, organized with the European hospitality group Teritoria, will bring together chefs from several Italian regions.

One of the headline announcements in Rome was the naming of the first four wines ever to receive a perfect score in the Platinum category of the WineHunter awards. The wines are Cantina Terlano's Alto Adige Terlano Doc Rarity 2013, Attilio Contini's Vernaccia di Oristano Doc Riserva 1998, Avignonesi's Vin Santo di Montepulciano Doc Occhio di Pernice 2012 and Ferrari Trento's Trentodoc Perlè 2002.

The selections cover very different styles and regions, from age-worthy white wine in Alto Adige to Sardinian Vernaccia, Tuscan dessert wine and traditional-method sparkling wine from Trentino. Organizers presented the results as a way to underline the range of Italian wine culture and the capacity of some wines to age for decades

while retaining market and critical value.

From Nov. 7 through Nov. 9, the core tasting program will fill the Kurhaus. Organizers said the Wine Italia section will feature more than 350 wine companies, while Wine International will bring together more than 100 producers from 12 countries, including Lebanon, Moldova, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Brazil, Argentina and South Africa. Another 120 labels selected for the WineHunter Area will be poured by sommeliers from Fisar Alto Adige.

New features this year include a “Next Platinum” selection for products that reached the top of their award range, and a presentation of wines that won the Grand Gold Medal at Mondial des Vins Extrêmes, the international competition organized by Cervim for mountain and heroic viticulture.

The festival’s food and beverage offer will run in parallel. From Nov. 6 through Nov. 9, the GourmetArena will host 150 companies presenting food specialties, beer and spirits from across Italy, along with showcooking events and pairing sessions. Organizers are also giving space to a no- and low-alcohol area, a sign that the fair is trying to address one of the most discussed shifts in drinks consumption. A rosé-focused section is also planned.

Business networking remains a central part of the event. Organizers said buyers’ spaces including the “Wh Buyers’ Club” and the “ICE Buyers Area” will be available, alongside a program of master classes at Hotel Terme Merano.

The scientific side of the festival will return with the summit “Breath and Cry of the Earth,” set for Nov. 6 at the Puccini Theater and organized with the International Viticulture & Enology Society, Connected Reality and ForTeam. The summit will include presentations of five research projects in viticulture and enology by scholars linked to the universities of Padua, Trento, Verona and Bolzano.

That academic program is meant to reinforce a message that has become more common across the wine industry: wine fairs are no longer only sales platforms or celebration events, but also places where producers, researchers and institutions meet to discuss adaptation. In Europe, that discussion increasingly centers on vineyard

resilience, changing consumer demand, sustainability standards and the definition of quality in a market where lighter styles and alternative products are gaining visibility.

The cultural program around the festival will also include presentations of books and projects linked to wine. On Nov. 6, Laura Donadoni is scheduled to present the European project “Grapes of Change,” which promotes gender equality in the wine world. On Nov. 7, Ferrari Trento executive Camilla Lunelli will present her new book, followed by a presentation from Chiara Giorleo of her volume on 90 women shaping change in wine. Another event at the Women’s Museum in Merano will connect the museum’s historical collections with local wines presented by the regional chapter of Le Donne del Vino.

On Nov. 8, additional book events are scheduled, including a presentation on winemakers from the Burgraviato area of Alto Adige, a new edition of Olga Sofia Schiaffino’s wine guide and journalist and sommelier Antonella Amodio’s updated work on pizza and wine pairings.

By building the program around tastings, awards, research, market meetings and public discussion, Merano WineFestival is trying to position itself as a forum for a wine business in transition. The launch of the observatory makes that ambition explicit, turning the event from a showcase of labels into a platform that wants to track how wine may look in Italy and abroad in the years ahead.